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## THE ECONOMIC BASIS OF FEMINISM

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The term "feminism" has been used in a variety of ways. But generally speaking it seems to be used as a name for the present extensive movement for removing discriminations against woman on the basis of her sex and for placing her entirely or as far as possible on an equality with man.

The economic basis of feminism is obviously one of the most if not the most important aspect of feminism, because its economic basis is more or less fundamental to every other aspect of feminism. This subject involves a great many problems which can be solved only in the course of time, some of them probably not for a long time to come, and in the present transitional stage it is impossible to give a final answer to most of them. I shall attempt, therefore, to state only the more important of these problems, indicating only tentatively a possible solution for some of them.

The more extreme type of feminist seems to assume that woman can, will and should be on an absolute equality with man in every respect. The tendency of this type of feminism is to minimize almost to the point of nullity the differences between man and woman and between the human and social functions of the two sexes. Economically, then, this would mean that woman can, will and should enter every occupation along with man and that she should become economically as independent as man is or is supposed to be. But it is not safe to assume this without careful study of the subject, and such study may indicate that the two sexes cannot be as nearly equal, or, to use a more correct term (for the term equal is question-begging), as nearly alike as this type of feminist seems to assume.

Contrasted with the extreme type of feminist is the extreme type of anti-feminist who emphasizes to an extreme degree the differences between man and woman and consequently the unlikeness which should and must exist in the social position of the two sexes. Economically this would mean that the occupations open to woman

should be few and distinct from those of man and that she should be in the main dependent economically upon man.

In this connection it is important to remember that the terms "economic independence" and "economic dependence" as ordinarily used are rather misleading. In the technical economic sense a person is economically independent who is earning an income in the form of economic goods or money in an economic occupation usually carried on outside of the home and in which he is producing goods which are put on the market and have exchange value. In this sense it is evident that the vast majority of women in the past and a large part of them now are economically dependent. But to a high degree in the past, and to a large extent still, women have been carrying on activities in the home which were economically valuable in the broader social meaning of the term for they were producing goods for home consumption, while in performing the functions of child bearing and rearing they have been performing functions which in the same broad social sense have been of the highest economic value. However, on the one hand, modern economic progress has taken many industries from the home, while, on the other hand, the advance of civilization has led naturally and necessarily to a lowering of the birth rate thus reducing woman's work in the bearing and rearing of children. These changes have lessened greatly the economic functions of woman within the home and have brought into being a relatively large leisure class of parasitic women who are in every sense of the term economically dependent, and a much larger class of women who are partially dependent. These changes are probably the strongest causes of the modern feminist movement because, on the one hand, a few of the more intelligent of the leisure class of women, who are mostly in the middle and upper classes, have become restless in their idleness and have initiated movements for enlarging the political and economic activities of women. On the other hand, these changes have made of serious importance the question of the economic independence of women, for modern civilization must decide whether it can tolerate so large a class of women who are wholly or partially dependent economically, and a part at least of the feminists recognize this problem and are interested in studying it.

Let us consider first to what extent woman is capable of entering all occupations. Physically she is somewhat handicapped as

compared with man. Investigations among European peasants, where the women had as good an opportunity to develop themselves physically as the men, have shown that women are on the average about two-thirds as strong as men. This does not mean that women must therefore be barred out of all occupations requiring physical strength. In most occupations men do not have to work to the limit of their strength, or at any rate have to do so only occasionally, so that in many of these occupations it is entirely possible for women to work with men. This is all the more possible if the work can be so arranged that the excessive strains shall fall upon the men, so that the tasks imposed upon the women shall not exceed their strength. The peasant woman, who works in the fields from early youth beside the boys and men, develops a robust womanhood which is of the utmost value for herself and her progeny. She presents an example which might well be followed by many (especially in this country) who regard it as demeaning for women to do hard physical labor and ungallant of men to require or even to permit it.

If, however, the excessive strains in any occupation are unavoidable for the women, it will bar them from the occupation. This is one of the reasons why women do not go to war. They can be taught to shoot, to ride horses astride, etc., and they can be as patriotic and ferocious as men. But success in war depends to a considerable extent upon the ability to sustain forced marches, to carry heavy loads, to run very fast upon occasion, and to engage in hand-to-hand combats in which sheer physical strength is the decisive factor.

Furthermore, there are occupations which are not beyond woman's physical strength, but in which she is likely to receive injury because of her sexual and reproductive organs.

As a quadruped, the female suffered little handicap because of the functions peculiar to sex, except when actually carrying or nursing the young. But after mankind had learned to stand erect, her support was far from ideal. The bones of the ankle and feet are too small to sustain great weight. A woman's knee is not so well adapted as a man's to form part of a sustaining column. The muscles of the leg, too, have a shorter purchase than a man's, hence the leverage between the trunk and the extremities is less. The strain of support is transferred to the back. Thus any work which requires long standing for a woman is injurious. All the pressure of the body's weight is brought to bear upon a portion where the sex organs and others are crowded together, and produces a dragging feeling above and about the hips. Women

performing such work are especially liable to congestion of all the organs enclosed by the hip bones, because standing and the habit of resting on one leg only cause a narrowing of the hips.<sup>1</sup>

These facts indicate that there are certain occupations which women have already entered to a large extent, such as work in factories and in stores, which may be very injurious to them and to their progeny unless the work can be so arranged as to remove these injurious features.

It has been the popular opinion that woman is mentally inferior, or, at least, is not as capable as man, for certain kinds of work. It is true that in certain activities in which she has had plenty of opportunity to achieve, such as art, music and literature, and to a lesser extent in science and philosophy, her achievements have not been as great as those of man. But in other fields the pragmatic test of accomplishment is not a fair one because of the restrictions upon her opportunities. So far as the subject has been studied scientifically, no great mental difference between the sexes has been found which would definitely exclude woman from any specific lines of work, whether or not it be true that man is capable of greater achievements along certain lines.

Looking at the matter from a purely economic point of view, it would then appear that, apart from establishing certain safeguards which would prevent women from undertaking work which would injure them physically, there is no reason for not permitting women to compete with men freely in all kinds of work, both physical and mental. The result would then doubtless be, if we exclude other considerations for the moment, that in some occupations men and women would continue to work together because neither sex would prove to have any superior fitness for it. In other occupations a decided segregation would take place because in each of these occupations one of the sexes would prove to have a superior fitness for it and under free competition would tend to drive out the other. Thus the total amount produced would be increased greatly because all the productive forces would be set to work and would work where most productive. As to which sex would profit most would depend upon which sex proved to be most efficient economically.

<sup>1</sup> R. Malcolm Keir, "Women in Industry," in the *Popular Science Monthly*, October, 1913, p. 376.

It is true that female labor is at present not likely to get a fair return in wages and is very likely to reduce the income of the male laborer as well. But this is due to the existence of a group of exploiters of labor who are ready to seize upon any new supply of labor, whether it be of women, children or newly arrived immigrants, which they can use as a club with which to beat down the wages of labor in general. Female and child labor is of peculiar value to the exploiter for this purpose because many of the women and children have male support which removes them from the pressing struggle for the means of subsistence and enables them to accept less than a living wage. In a more socialized economic system in which the attempt was made to use every productive force in society and to distribute the social income among the producers according to their productive power, work would be provided for every economically productive woman and her remuneration, like that of the male laborer, would be based upon the amount produced by her so far as it could be determined.

The preceding paragraph emphasizes what is illustrated at various points in this article, namely, that the degree and character of female labor must depend largely upon the nature of the general economic organization. The problem of the economic basis of feminism is, therefore, bound up with the larger question of the economic organization of society in general.

But this question as to whether women can enter all occupations as freely as men cannot be determined solely upon considerations which are purely and immediately economic in their character. There are at least three other important factors involved which interfere with the purely economic solution upon the basis of free personal competition. In the first place, the functions of child bearing and child rearing interfere seriously with female labor. In the second place, marital and family unions tend to conflict with the mobility of female labor. In the third place, male gallantry tends to check woman's economic productiveness.

It is obvious that the functions of child bearing and rearing must fall most heavily upon the women. At all times a large part of the women must be partially or wholly disabled by these functions. This means, in the first place, that they must be supported while thus disabled. But it also means, under the present economic and social organization, that the probability of their becom-

ing disabled makes it more difficult for them to enter the economic field, while if they succeed in entering, the disabling, however temporary it may be, throws them out without any assurance usually of being able to reenter later. Under the present system the woman becomes dependent upon a man, usually her husband, and usually continues dependent upon him even after she is no longer disabled. It is true that medical science and social devices for the care of children have greatly lessened the extent to which women are disabled by child bearing and rearing. But under the present system it is bound to remain a serious handicap upon women in the economic world and to force them to become dependent upon the men. Under some other system, as, for example, some form of socialism, where social support would be provided the disabled woman and the assurance of being able to reenter the economic field when capable of doing so, the handicap would be much less. However, the temporary absences would still handicap her somewhat in competition with the men and the women who were not performing the functions of child bearing and rearing.

In most occupations a certain degree of mobility of labor is necessary. In most marital unions both parties to the union are not likely to be engaged in the same kind of work. Or even if they are, they may not succeed in securing work in the same place. So that as long as permanent marital unions are the rule, and this will probably be always, such unions are bound to interfere somewhat with the mobility of labor. The same would be true of any other kind of family union, such as between parents and children. This difficulty is least likely to arise in cities where there are many opportunities to work. But it becomes a serious one in small places where the opportunities to work are not so numerous or so varied as in a city, and may lead either to a break in the union or to one member becoming dependent upon the other.

Inasmuch as up to the present it has been the general rule for the woman to be dependent upon the man, it has usually been easy for the woman to follow the man wherever his work led him. But if women are to become economically independent, this difficulty is bound to arise much more frequently because it will not be so easy for the woman to follow the man. It would then be a question either of breaking the union or of one of them giving up to the other. If the woman's economic interests were greater than those

of the man, he might have to give up to her. And if women generally were more successful economically than men the situation might become reversed and we might see the men usually following the women wherever their work led them. However, owing to the handicaps under which women labor, which have been mentioned, and which tend to make the economic interests of the men more important than those of the women, it is probable that the women will continue usually to follow the men, thus increasing their dependence upon the men. Under a more socialized system an attempt would doubtless be made to provide employment not only for the men but also for those in their families. But under the present system marital and other family unions are certain to conflict with woman's opportunities to secure economic independence, while under the socialized system also it would probably be impossible to eliminate this difficulty entirely.

In the third place, male gallantry will always be somewhat of an obstacle to woman's economic independence and productiveness. This gallantry has its fundamental psychological basis in the tender feelings aroused by the sexual passion. These feelings doubtless exist in many of the other higher animals. They impel the male to watch over and care for the female. In the female there seems to be a corresponding receptive attitude which harmonizes with her more passive sexual nature. The biological value of these characteristics must be obvious enough for they have doubtless played an important part in caring for the female during breeding and in the rearing of the young. This, of course, does not mean that man is never brutal to woman. But his brutality towards woman is probably due in the main to the same brutal feelings and instincts which may make him brutal towards any living being, while so far as he has a peculiar attitude towards woman, it is one of tenderness, especially towards the woman or women with whom he is united by sexual bonds.

It goes without saying that there are certain artificial elements in this gallantry. It would take too long to trace here the historical evolution of the idea of property rights in woman which still influences the man to regard the woman as something belonging to him and for whose maintenance, therefore, he is responsible, or of the subsidiary idea which makes of the quality of his support of his female dependent a measure of his pecuniary ability. Nor have



we space to trace the evolution of the idea bred into the woman that her sex is something of peculiar value which must be bartered for a consideration. This idea still influences most women in their dealings with the other sex all the way from the unions which are most temporary and most explicitly and frankly commercial in their nature to the permanent marital unions in which the bartering is glossed over by a vast mass of social usages and the polite phrases of religion and conventional morality. This idea has been and is still a valuable safeguard for women against having children which would be embarrassing to them and would themselves be in a trying position in society. But this idea is utterly incompatible with the feminist ideal which must involve the idea of the union between members of the two sexes being a mutual affair in which each is giving himself or herself in an equal degree to the other. This idea is very slowly making its way and may sometime become more or less general. But however much this idea may be accepted as an intellectual proposition by both sexes, these tender feelings of the male and the receptive attitude on the part of the female, which are indissoluble concomitants of the fundamental sexual passion, will always lead to a certain amount of care of the female by the male. This will always be somewhat of an obstacle in the way of female economic independence and will always be somewhat of a force for keeping in existence a leisure class of parasitic, unproductive women.

It is true that in woman, also, the sexual passion is connected with tender feelings which impel her to do things for the man towards whom she is attracted. But generally speaking, though with numerous notable exceptions in individual cases, she is impelled to perform personal services such as usually belong within the home and is not likely to go outside of the home to perform services which are not so immediately personal in their character, unless circumstances force her to do so. The man, on the contrary, since the day of the cave-man, partly on account of his superior strength enabling him to hunt and fight, etc., partly on account of the temporary helplessness of the woman due to child bearing and the helplessness of the young, partly in order to win favor in the eyes of the woman in competition with his rivals, but also on account of the gallantry we have described, has at all times gone far afield in his efforts to perform services for the woman.

Another handicap upon woman in the economic struggle, which, though probably less serious than those already discussed, is worthy of note, is that, owing to her valuation of her sexual nature as having peculiar worth and the consequent desirability of bartering it for as high a price as possible, she must devote much attention to her physical appearance. Most economic occupations are so absorbing and so time-consuming that they prevent her from devoting much time to her physical appearance, while many kinds of work are of such a nature as to rob her of the external bloom and other superficial characteristics which are esteemed so highly in the existing male standard of valuation of female charms. If the present social valuation of the female sexual nature changes so that she will no longer be taught to regard it as something to be bartered, and if the male estimation of woman changes so that it will include all of her physique and her mental attainments as well, this handicap upon woman may disappear entirely or in large part, or, at any rate, she will not be handicapped any more than man who will have to compete with his rivals for the favor of woman. But at present it doubtless is somewhat of a handicap upon woman.

In a longer treatment of this subject it would be interesting and valuable to discuss in detail the extent to which women have entered occupations, their success in these occupations, and the position of the women of the working class, of the agricultural class, of the professional class and of the leisure class with respect to this subject. It is evident that the present-day problem of the economic basis of feminism is somewhat different for each of these classes. But we have been able to discuss briefly the economic factors in the rise of the modern feminist movement, the probable result of carrying out fully the feminist ideal of placing woman in the same economic status as man, and some of the obstacles, social and biological in their nature, in the way of the complete attainment of this ideal.